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Arab revolutions

# “Arab Spring has now turned into a winter”

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**“It began on December 18, 2010, as a popular uprising triggered by the self-immolation of Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, protesting against the country’s corrupt and autocratic regime. What it eventually led to was a chain of revolutionary uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), toppling dictatorial governments in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen. Popularly known as the “Arab Spring”, the movement has since descended into chaos, with Islamic fundamentalist forces gaining in power.”**[*The Hindu* intrrview with Gilbert Achcar.]

**Since the 2010-11 uprisings, except in Tunisia, the model of liberal democracy has not taken off in MENA (Middle East, North African) countries. Is there still hope or do you even see liberal “electoral” democracy as an answer to the ongoing crisis in the region? We saw, for instance, how despite elections in June this year the dictator Bashar al-Assad of the Ba’ath Party remained in power in Syria.....**

The question of democracy in the MENA region cannot be reduced to one of liberal democracy as it presently prevails in the West. Even if you take liberalism in the political meaning alone, Arab countries are far from implementing it, and this applies to Tunisia too where a formally democratic government is now in place. The MENA region is suffering from a very deep social and economic crisis, which is at the root of the general turmoil and upheaval. In order to solve the ongoing crisis, there must be a shift away from the neoliberal socio-economic model in the region, which led to the crisis. The real stumbling block is the combination of a heavily repressive and corrupt “deep state” with crony capitalism of the worst type. This combination has not been dismantled in any of the region’s states, including Tunisia. In Syria, where the Ba’ath dictatorship is entrenched in power since half a century, the elections lacked any democratic legitimacy. To achieve real democratisation, what is needed is a radical dismantling of the “deep state” that continues to uphold the existing social-political order in the region.

**The initial wave of hope for liberating the Arab peoples from the autocratic regimes seems to have been dashed. When the movement started in 2010 there was a great deal of euphoria, not anymore. Where is the movement headed in your analysis?**

The euphoria, when the movement began, was based on illusions, but was justified by the fact that the peoples of the region started to come out massively on the streets wanting to impose their will.

However, the fact that they got onto the streets was not enough in itself to achieve the outcomes to which they aspired. We had a tremendous massive popular uprising in the MENA region, but with only weak and/or disoriented progressive forces. Even in a country like Tunisia where there is a strong progressive organisation in the form of a trade union movement dominated by the left, the latter suffers from a lack of appropriate strategy. They fell into the trap of the bipolarity between two equally reactionary forces – the old regimes on the one hand, and the Islamic fundamentalist opposition forces on the other.

The progressive forces have been shifting alliance from one to another of these two counter-revolutionary poles. Currently it is the infighting between the two reactionary poles that is dominant in countries like Syria, Yemen, Libya, and to a certain extent in Egypt as well. This is the key reason why the whole momentum of the initial movement has been lost. Fanatical Islamic fundamentalist forces have grown all over the region, the most spectacular being the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” and caliphate. What should have been clear from the start has become obvious now: radical regime change can only be violent due to the utmost brutality of the old regime. But to conclude that the old regime has won would also be very short-sighted. MENA countries hold world record rates of unemployment. Until

this crucial issue is solved, the upheaval will continue. I have been saying this since 2011. It is why I have maintained that what started then is not a “Spring”, which denotes a season, but a long-term revolutionary process that will carry on for several years and decades before the region reaches lasting stability.

**In your work you classify Arab countries as rentier states, as they derive most of their revenues from oil and gas. The recent crash in prices of oil worldwide has hurt the economies of these countries. What kind of socio-economic transformation is necessary to resolve the ongoing crisis in the region?**

Indeed, the MENA region has been very much dependent on oil and gas exports, the prices for which are fixed by the world market. These are extremely volatile prices. Hence the countries in the region face the risk of sharp economic ups and downs. However, not all MENA countries are similarly affected: some of them are oil importers; others are small producers and others massive exporters. But oil dominates the regional economy overall. A major aspect of the radical change necessary in the region, therefore, is diversification of the economies – developing a real industrial base and reducing the dependency on crude oil and gas exports. The region does not lack natural resources, capital and labour. However, much of the natural resources and the capital accumulated from their export are under Western control. All major oil exporters of the region – the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council that comprises the richest Arab States – depend on the U.S. for their very existence and security. The Saudi kingdom is actually behind the fall in oil prices and they are doing that at their own cost for strategic reasons benefitting the U.S. The bulk of Saudi money abroad is invested in U.S. treasury bonds and U.S. banks. All this is pure loss for the whole region. Western imperialism has created the regional system of Gulf monarchies in order to guarantee its exploitation of their resources, and this may remain the case until the last drop of oil has been sucked out of the region. Another aspect of the radical change that is necessary if the region is to come out of its disastrous condition is to realise the dream of a leader like Egypt’s former president Gamal Abdel Nasser who wanted to unify the Arab countries in a federal republic or a union of republics. You have there a group of countries, which speak the same language and share the same culture, but are split, into two dozen states to serve the interest of erstwhile imperial forces that are keen on perpetuating this division. This is at a time when Europe, with its much higher diversity of cultures, has been building its own union.

**Are you supportive of Western intervention in Arab countries, like Syria, that are fraught with civil strife? In your book you haven’t taken a categorical position on this...**

Western imperialism is a major part of the problem of the MENA region, and definitely not part of the solution. However, this does not lead me to a knee-jerk attitude, opposing any form of intervention under any circumstance. When you have circumstances such as one in which a whole city or a population are threatened with a large-scale massacre – as was the case in Benghazi in Libya or in the city of Kobane in the Syrian part of Kurdistan – and the danger is imminent, in the absence of an alternative, you cannot oppose military strikes from the air inasmuch as they contribute to removing the direct threat. But as soon as this imminent threat is removed then the continuation of this direct Western intervention should be opposed. The U.S., which leads such interventions, always tries to co-opt ongoing processes steering them to its own interests. This is why I oppose direct Western military intervention in general. However, I do support the demand for arms deliveries made by the Libyan uprising in 2011 or the Syrian democratic opposition since 2012, or the Kurdish left-wing forces in 2014. They need weapons in order to fight back forces that are much more heavily armed than themselves. However, the U.S., whether in Libya in 2011 or Syria since then, refuses to provide the democratic oppositions with the defensive arms that they require. This leads me to consider that the U.S. has a big share of responsibility in the huge massacre inflicted on the Syrian people and in the destruction of their country. Had the Syrian opposition received the defensive weapons it has been requesting from the start, anti-aircraft weapons in particular, the Syrian regime would not have been able to use its air force, with which it perpetrated most of the destruction and killing caused in the course of the civil war there.

**The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) had significantly benefitted from the Arab Spring uprisings, winning elections in Tunisia and Egypt and playing a major role in the uprisings in Syria, Libya and Yemen. But with the fall of**

**Mohamed Morsi’s government in Egypt last year, its prospects appear to be doomed. Can we conclude then that Islamic fundamentalism cannot be the answer to the demands of the masses in these countries? I ask this because the whole Arab Spring and its aftermath has been analysed primarily through the lens of Islamic movements, which is driving Western discourse on intervention in these countries ...**

Not only is Islamic fundamentalism not the answer, but Islam itself is not the answer – nor is it the problem. The 2011 uprising is not an uprising about religion. It is a culmination of the socio-economic crisis and political oppression that exist in the region. The failure of the MB is above all due to their lack of economic and social policy different from what was pursued by the old regimes. In Tunisia and Egypt they failed in solving the social crises. What we are actually witnessing right now is the decline of the MB accompanied by the rise of fundamentalist forces that are much worse – Al-Qaeda and IS. The lack of progressive leadership is the key reason why various forces of Islamic fundamentalism are able to cash in on the popular anger in the region. In order to understand this historically, one just needs to look back at the surge of fundamentalism that started in 1970s. In most Muslim-majority countries, Islamic fundamentalism had been marginalised in the 1960s when left-wing nationalism was on the rise, as represented above all by Nasser. It is only when this went into decline starting from the 1970s that we saw the beginning of the rise of Islamic fundamentalist forces.

**During the Arab Spring the role of the media in the uprising and that of the social media in aiding the organisation of the movement on the ground was emphasised. Four years on, do you think it still has a role to play in influencing the movement’s organisation and outcomes?**

The role played by the modern media and social media cannot be reversed, of course. There has been a deep change in the overall technological environment of humanity. Satellite television played a major role in the recent upheaval, and it is still playing an important role, albeit diminished from its peak in 2011. On the other hand, the role of social media keeps increasing. When the Arab uprising in 2011 was called a “Facebook Revolution”, this was an exaggeration, to be sure, but not one without a grain of truth. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, all these media, have become major tools for spreading messages and videos, across the political spectrum from progressive forces to forces on the far right, such as IS that uses the Internet intensively.

**Your advice to progressive forces aiming for a successful revolution?**

Progressive forces need to be bold enough to dare to struggle and dare to win. If radical change does not come through them, we will only get what I called a “clash of barbarisms”. Syria is the clearest example of this presently with the Syrian regime on one hand, and IS and Al-Qaeda on the other. But the uprising is not over yet. The Arab “spring” has now turned into a “winter”, but there will be more seasons to come.

[\*The Hindu\*](#), 23 December 2014.